

the passive female

the theory of patriarchy

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The “discovery” of women certainly ranks as one of the most interesting and exciting phenomena of recent American scholarship. Although scholars have always noticed women, and writers like Tocqueville and Catherine Beecher have written a great deal about them, women nevertheless have been seen largely as an eddy within the mainstream of male history and thought. The great debates about the changing American character, or about economic and political liberty, usually centered on the male half of the population. Theorists and critics sometimes incorporated women into male categories, and sometimes vaguely thought of them as representing a more communal perspective or as standing for traditional values in a rapidly industrializing country. Mostly, though, women were invisible.

Feminist theory has destroyed this invisibility. The theory is well established now, and it is time to analyze it carefully and examine its assumptions. There are obviously different and conflicting perspectives. The theorists that will be examined in this article are usually viewed as among the most radical of the feminist theorists. They depict the traditional woman as a nonindividual, and see her as having been psychologically and institutionally dominated. She was the “other,” a passive and brainwashed victim of the “patriarchy.” These theorists feel that the traditional male roles were far more desirable than the traditional female roles, but they usually reject the “patriarchal” definition of reality and the individual that they discern in contemporary America. A second school of feminist writers has argued that traditional women had a mind of her own, and her own base of strength, within the “Woman’s Sphere.” They see

traditional women in a more favorable light than do the theorists of patriarchy, and usually perceive traditional male roles more unfavorably. These writers do not necessarily reject the current organization of American society.

This theoretical schism has been largely hidden by the tendency of authors and researchers to work within discrete areas and use different bodies of literature as resource material. There has also been a common sense of purpose as the various feminist theorists gave birth to a new image of the social world. They were central to the Women's Movement. Though the theorists were not read by all feminists, the job of creating the vision of women as an oppressed class fell largely upon them. This "oppression" was not as self-evident as the oppression of Blacks. Feminist theory had to move against a culture which believed that it was protecting women and which did not view the various legal and economic restrictions on women as discriminatory (indeed these restrictions were usually not even seen). Even more important, though there were many jokes about women's incompetence in the "real" world (e.g., the woman driver jokes) and a pervasive feeling that women had to be protected from seeing evil and hearing dirty words, women were often seen by the dominant (male) culture as the more powerful of the two sexes. In the 1950s there was a focus on the overbearing mother. Situation comedies portrayed competent wives and inept men. Journalists and popular social analysts viewed this as a real social problem, and often voiced concern that boys were not being presented with adequate role models.

Women did not make much money, but increasingly they were seen as in control of the ways in which it was spent. Men appeared to have been domesticated. They were organization men caught in the rat race, and their role was largely defined as making enough money to take care of the children and provide a proper life style. Men (or at least some men) were supposed to be in charge of ruling the country and running business, but women were seen as being in charge of "what everything was for." As George Gobel used to say, *he* was in charge of the important things. His wife Alice decided on the house, the car, the kid's school, etc. But *he* decided whether to admit China to the United Nations.

The laws appeared to reflect this attitude and were seen as protecting women. The courts treated children as the mother's, and the alimony-poor male was the butt of innumerable jokes and cartoons. Popular women's magazines treated men as children who could be manipulated by the more emotionally-in-touch and stable woman. In marriage the woman was supposed to be the one who was mature enough to make the sacrifices needed to keep the marriage together for the sake of the children. When the psychologically and physically maimed soldiers came home it was women who were supposed to pick up the pieces and bring them back into civilized life.¹ A real man was one who made "his" woman happy. Women were the agents of civilization and men—to be men—had to get away from them. Depending on social class they escaped to the army, the locker room, the men's club, the neighborhood bar or the street corner. Despite what we

today perceive as the “reality” of sexual discrimination in this period, the pundits of the 1950s and early 1960s did not portray a society of dominant men and subservient women. That perception has been largely created by feminist theorists.

Feminist theory is current and exciting. Because it has touched so many lives, and radically changed well-entrenched historical perspectives, most of the energy of feminist scholars and theorists has been engaged in pushing theoretical insights further, rather than in careful analysis of the assumptions and arguments of previous work. Some analysis of opposing theories is, of course, implicit in the differing approaches. I think a more detailed analysis is necessary, since what started as an examination of the ideology of the male system has itself become an ideology.

The advocates of the concept of patriarchy are often soft Marxists, who argue that underlying the economic class dialectic of Marx is an even more fundamental sexual class dialectic—though for the most part they emphasize cultural and institutional, rather than economic, controls. In addition to Simone de Beauvoir² this group would include Kate Millett (*Sexual Politics*), Susan Brownmiller (*Against Our Will*), Adrienne Rich (*Of Woman Born*) and, most importantly, Mary Daly (*Beyond God the Father and Gyn-Ecology*).³ These books are well known and important. The various writers within this school have developed a common theoretical core and have expanded upon each other’s ideas.

Those writers who have developed the opposing notion of the “woman’s sphere” have probably not had the same individual importance as the theorists of patriarchy, but their books are numerous and their collective impact has been important.⁴ In this article my purpose is not to study this literature, but rather to highlight the arguments and assumptions of the theorists of patriarchy. Towards this end I will use three important works on women’s history—Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*; Sheila Rothman, *Woman’s Proper Place*; and Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*.⁵ These books are central to the “women’s sphere” perspective and illustrate its methods. They are less explicitly grounded in social philosophy than the books of the theorists of patriarchy. They make use of diaries; they are pluralistic and they are carefully grounded in academic history.

Both groups consistently dismiss as unimportant what the other views as central. Both arguments have been extremely influential, and the popular combination of the two is usually held together by confusion, position-jumping and obfuscation.

dominant patriarchs and passive women: the central concept of the theory of patriarchy

The theorists of patriarchy view males very much as Marxists view the ruling class. Males are seen as controlling access to institutional power, and it is argued that they mold ideology, philosophy, art and religion to suit their needs. The exercise of male power is viewed as at least somewhat

conspiratorial, and women—whatever their economic status—are perceived as an oppressed class. Like the Freudian theory of the unconscious, the concept of patriarchy is a very broad idea that underlies all hypotheses and since the concept can always be “saved,” it cannot be disproved. To say that something is not disprovable is not, however, to say that it is unexaminable or unimportant in its implications.

Though the concept of patriarchy is rooted in Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* was really the book that popularized the idea among American Feminists. Millett claims that the relationship has gone largely unexamined and unacknowledged, even though sexual domination is “perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its fundamental concept of power.” She writes:

It is one which tends . . . to be sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, certainly more enduring. . . .

Our society, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance—in short, every avenue of power . . . including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands. . . . What lingers of supernatural authority, The Diety, “His” ministry, together with the ethics and values, the philosophy and art of our culture—its very civilization—as T. S. Eliot once observed, is of male manufacture.⁶

Adrienne Rich argues that the “power of the fathers has been difficult to grasp because it permeates everything, even the language in which we try to describe it. It is diffuse and concrete; symbolic and literal; universal and expressed with local variations which obscure its universality.” It does not matter what a woman does—she may “live in *purdah* or drive a truck,” live on *kibbutz* or be a single parent breadwinner, be the head of state or wash the underwear of a millionaire’s wife, but, Rich continues, “whatever my status or situation, my derived economic class, or my sexual preference, I live under the power of the fathers, and I have access only to so much of privilege or influence as the patriarchy is willing to accord to me, and only for so long as I will pay the price of male approval.”⁷

Within patriarchy men, “by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor” define the part that women shall (or shall not) play.⁸ Women are thought of as a subgroup in a man’s world: “Patriarchy” is believed to be “equivalent to culture and culture is patriarchy,” and the “great” or “liberalizing” periods of history are thought to have been the same for women and men, children and adults.⁹ It is, Mary Daly argues, “a kind of gang rape of (women’s) minds as well as of bodies” by the various cultural institutions that impose a male value system upon women.¹⁰ Patriarchy is a way of thought, she argues. As the “Religion of Rapism” it legitimizes

all kinds of boundary violation. It blesses the invasion of privacy,

for example, by such governmental agencies as the FBI and the CIA. . . . It extends its blessing also to the violation of life itself by scientifically 'created' pollution, by the metastasizing of a carcinogenic environment . . . and by the hideous weapons of modern warfare. The creators of artificial death belong to the same funeral fraternity as the various male supermothers—creators of artificial life and manipulators of existing life. As boundary violators, all participate in the mythic paradigm of Rapism. All march in the same funeral procession, and the knowledge they share in common is mortuary science.¹¹

Men are often identified with the lowest class of males, or the lowest and most violent class of males is seen as the agent of all males. It is argued that we live in a rapist society, and Kate Millett sees all men as overtly or covertly aggressive and sadistic against women:

Emotional response to violence against women in patriarchy is often curiously ambivalent; references to wife beating, for example, *invariably* produce laughter and some embarrassment. Exemplary atrocity, such as the mass murders committed by Richard Speck, greeted at one level with a certain scandalized, possibly hypocritical indignation, is capable of eliciting a mass response of titillation at another level. . . . In view of the sadistic character of such public fantasy as caters to male audiences in pornography or semi-pornographic media, one might expect that a certain element of identification is by no means absent from the general response. Probably a similar collective *frisson* sweeps through racist society when its more 'logical' members have perpetuated a lynching.¹²

The identification of patriarchal attitudes towards women with those of the most violent males is carried further by Brownmiller. Her book is about rape—not only the "police blotter" kind, in which a criminal attacks and sexually molests a woman, but about a society based on rape: the "conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear."¹³ The police blotter rapists "have served in effect as front-line masculine shock troops" who benefit their superiors in class and station. It is "on the shoulders of these unthinking, predictable, insensitive, violence-prone young men that there rests an age old burden that amounts to an historic mission: the perpetuation of male domination of women by force."¹⁴ Rape is thus not an individual problem. It is a societal problem arising from a "distorted masculine philosophy of aggression."¹⁵ Rape in war is seen as only revealing "the male psyche in its boldest form, without the veneer of 'chivalry' or civilization."¹⁶

Adrienne Rich does not concentrate upon this aspect of patriarchal society, but Mary Daly agrees with Brownmiller and carries her ideas further. She argues that it "would be a mistake to think that rape is reducible to the physical act of a few men who are rapists" since there are countless "armchair" rapists who vicariously enjoy the act, and in addition—since rape instills in a woman the need for protection—all men have their power enhanced by rape. Rape, therefore, is a "way of life" and

the “Most Unholy Trinity of Rape, Genocide and War is a logical expression of phallogocentric power.”¹⁷

In addition to rape, the Law, the family and religion are the major methods through which men have dominated women. Women have internalized the values of the patriarchs. Thus they become willing, cooperative and passive victims.

The arguments on the family and motherhood are especially interesting since these institutions have often been seen in popular culture as devices to protect women, and as institutions that have increased their power. The transvaluation of the family and motherhood is accomplished largely through the degradation of woman’s traditional role. It is described as “menial labor and compulsory child care” while the male role is enhanced to that of “specifically human endeavor.”¹⁸ Millett echoes Marx’s theory of alienation when she argues that the “limited role allotted to the female tends to arrest her at the level of biological experience. Therefore nearly all that can be described as distinctly human rather than animal activity (in their own way animals also give birth and care for their young) is largely reserved for the male.”¹⁹

As is true of the rape metaphor, the concept of the family as an enslaving institution is more roundly developed as one moves up the chronological ladder from Millett to Daly. For Kate Millett women are ruled through the family (since they have little or no formal relationship to the state), and are socialized by it. The legal rules governing the family have, in general, reinforced the domination of males.²⁰ The end of patriarchy would require the destruction of the taboos against those things which threaten “patriarchal, monogamous marriage.” These include prohibitions against homosexuality, illegitimacy, adolescent, pre- and extra-marital sexuality. Changing the ideology of male supremacy would allow men to be emotional and women to be efficient and intellectual. This would have a drastic effect upon the “patriarchal proprietary family.” The abolition of sex roles and the economic independence of women would undermine both its authority and its financial structure. The patriarchal family, she argues, “depends for its cohesiveness primarily on the economic dependence of women and children.” Since financial equality is almost impossible within it, and women are tied to the care of children, the traditional division of roles necessitates male supremacy.²¹

Susan Brownmiller makes passing references to the wife as the husband’s property (that seems to be the only reason that he objects when she is raped),²² and monogamous marriage as a necessity to ensure that the male had legal heirs,²³ but her attention is really focused elsewhere. Adrienne Rich weaves a complex, and somewhat contradictory, tapestry. Of the theorists of patriarchy discussed here, Rich alone sees some value in the role of the traditional woman. She sees motherhood as an important, powerful and, in many ways, attractive role. Part of her envies new mothers. She loves her own children and thinks that they respond. On the other hand “individual, seemingly private pains of the mothers” are to be understood only within the context of a patriarchal system for which

motherhood, and control of a woman's productive power, is essential. Institutionalized motherhood is not the "natural" role for women. It arose after the industrial revolution removed production from the home,²⁴ and it "has a history, it has an ideology, it is more fundamental than tribalism or nationalism."²⁵

The experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests; behavior which threatens the institutions, such as illegitimacy, abortion, lesbianism, is considered deviant or criminal. . . . Institutionalized motherhood demands of the woman maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than creation of the self. Motherhood is 'sacred' so long as its offspring are 'legitimate'—that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother.²⁶

When Rich writes about male children, she sees the role of the mother as ambiguous: all powerful and powerless at the same time. For her, the image of the mother has become a "dangerous archetype." She is seen as a source of angelic love and forgiveness in a ruthless and impersonal world, the emotional agent in a society ruled by male logic and the "symbol and residue of moral values and tenderness in a world of wars, brutal competition and contempt for human weakness."²⁷ The "sons of the fathers" look everywhere for the woman with whom they can be infantile. The male group is too obsessed with aggression and defense to legitimize self doubt, ordinary mortal weakness and tears. A man can only reveal this side of himself to women "whom he must then hold in contempt, or resent for their knowledge of his weakness."²⁸ As long as women are the only nurturers of children, their sons will look to women only for compassion and will view strong women as a threat. There can never be enough mothers, Rich argues, for the sons who grow up in a public role separate from the private female role of affection. The net result is that men have contempt for women, while women look upon men as children. It is infantilizing to men and entrapping to women.²⁹

The powerful/powerless role which exists for women when Rich talks of sons becomes far less ambiguous when she writes of daughters. Then the feminine role appears to be totally unsatisfactory. Women are viewed as the passive servants of the patriarchs, and mothers are the instrument through which daughters are taught to conform to their "degrading and dissipating role."³⁰ The mother's "self-hatred and low expectations are the binding rags for the psyche of the daughter."³¹ All of a woman's energy is absorbed in caring for others, while the patriarchs use women as they please. They pass female children "from lap to lap, so that all the males in a room (father, brother, acquaintances) can get a hard-on."³² When Rich writes of the mother-daughter relationship men are always viewed as evil. If a man seems to support a women it is only because he is using her as a weapon against other women:

A man often lends his daughter the ego support he denies his wife;

he may use his daughter as a stalking horse against his wife; he may simply feel less threatened by a daughter's power, especially if she adores him. A male teacher may confirm a woman student while throttling his wife and daughters. Men have been able to give us power, support, and certain forms of nurture, as individuals, when they choose; but the power is always stolen power, withheld from the mass of women in patriarchy.³³

Patriarchal men have created, "out of a mixture of sexual and affective frustration, blind need, force, ignorance and intelligence split from its emotional grounding," a society and system which has "turned against women her own organic nature, the source of her awe and her organic powers."³⁴ According to Rich, maternal power has been "domesticated" and the womb has been turned against women and made into a source of powerlessness.³⁵ Women became the passive victim. They were constrained to the mother-child relationship, while men presumably squeezed themselves out of this "essential human relationship." But, even when woman is safely caged in a single aspect of her being—the maternal—she remains an object of mistrust, suspicion, misogyny in both overt and insidious forms.³⁶ She cannot even escape the trap by refusing to be a mother. Childless women are not better off, they just have different problems.

'Childless' women have been burned as witches, persecuted as lesbians, have been refused the right to adopt children because they were unmarried. They have been seen as embodiments of the great threat to male hegemony: the woman who is not tied to the family, who is disloyal to the law of heterosexual pairing and bearing.³⁷

The all-powerful male wins both ways—"child bearing and childlessness have been manipulated to make women into negative qualities, or bearers of evil."³⁸

Rich argues that gynecology completes the male conquest of motherhood. Like Brownmiller's rapist, the gynecologist is not seen in the context of a group that hurts both men and women (e.g., as representatives of a Medical Conspiracy) but as a male stalking horse. Gynecologists took control of childbirth away from women and placed it in the hands of a "male medical technology."³⁹ Childbirth should be "one aspect of the entire process of a woman's life, beginning with her own expulsion from her mother's body" and tied in with "her growing sense of her own body and its strengths, her masturbation, her menses, her physical relationship to nature and to other human beings, her first and subsequent orgasmic experiences . . . her conception, pregnancy to the moment of first holding her child."⁴⁰ But the patriarchs do not view childbirth as a part of the female experience; rather it is seen as a kind of production. They defined childbirth as a medical emergency and placed it in the hospital. Women, Rich argues, have gained little from gynecology. They accepted it. Like other patriarchal institutions, gynecology enslaved women and used female energy for the males' own benefit. Women accepted gynecology because

they, “like other dominated people,” have learned to internalize the ruler’s will and make it theirs.⁴¹

Thus, according to Rich, men have dominated women by their power—physical, economic, institutional and psychological. Women have had to learn to manipulate and seduce—they have nothing more than “the child’s or courtesan’s ‘power’ to wheedle and the dependent’s power to disguise her feelings—even from herself—in order to obtain favors, or literally to survive.”⁴² Women cannot join to fight this conspiracy because if they do they “are made taboo to women—not just sexually, but as comrades, co-creators, co-inspiritors.”⁴³ They have accepted the male evaluation of themselves and are trapped by it.

For Rich, as for the other theorists of patriarchy that have been discussed, traditional woman is conceptualized as a duped and powerless victim. Her degraded position has few, if any, redeeming features. The power of the fathers, acting either directly or indirectly through agents (lower-class males or women) permeates everything. Men define the role women are to play as they define the language and patterns of thought. Women were incorporated into a family structure controlled by men and created to meet their own needs. The role of motherhood is especially disvalued, with mothers acting primarily as male agents in the socializing of the men’s children. Women have certainly perpetuated these male institutions, but only because they have submitted to male domination of their will. Finally women gave up the last vestige of their power when they rejected midwives in favor of male gynecologists.

Historical woman is viewed by these writers as almost absolutely passive, and as having no individual or class volition. She is effect rather than cause, agent rather than actor. Presumably, though, some contemporary women have had (or will have) their consciousness raised. After all, they buy and read feminist literature. There is an organized feminist movement, and there has been some legal and ideological change since the 1950s. The books discussed in this section are obviously written to an audience that the authors think can perceive, and can reject, the values/language/institutions of the dominant patriarchs. If the theory of patriarchy is correct, though, how can this new woman emerge? Why is the absolute and conspiratorial power of the males collapsing, or why will it collapse? Why will men give up their power? No explanation of this crucial transition is given—it seems to be a discontinuity in history. This problem is well illustrated in the works of Mary Daly, to whose thought we now turn.

mary daly and the patriarchs

Mary Daly is probably the most brilliant and insightful of the theorists of patriarchy. She incorporates the arguments of the other theorists and pushes beyond them. Although she does not share Rich’s ambivalence toward the role of traditional women, Rich has consistently praised her

work. Daly's arguments demonstrate the patriarchal theory at its best, and they are certainly worth special analysis.

Daly does not see any value at all in women's traditional roles. Men "have sapped the life force of women" and it is "female talent that has been lost to ourselves and our species."⁴⁴ The ultimate "Holy War" is to wrench free the female energy, "which has been captured and forced into prostitution by patriarchy."⁴⁵

What is the substance of the chain that has 'linked the fathers and the sons,' culminating in the Auschwitzes, the Vietnams, the corporations, the ecclesiastical and secular inquisitions, the unspeakable emptiness of the consuming and consumed creatures whose souls are lost in pursuit of built-in obsolescence? This is precisely the chain that derives its total reality from the reduction of women to non-beings. The strength of the chain is the energy sapped out of the bodies and minds of women—the mothers and daughters whose lifeblood has been sucked away by the patriarchal system. The chain that has drained us will be broken when women draw back their own life force.⁴⁶

Women, Daly argues, have been molded by the patriarchy into a stereotype that implies "hyper-emotionalism, passivity, self-abnegation."⁴⁷ The patriarchy has created women; it created the "externalized structures and internalized images. . . . that have cut us off from realizing psychic wholeness in ourselves and consequently have cut down our capacity for genuine participation in history."⁴⁸ The oppressor has invaded women's psyches and now exists within them. All of this is not to "blame" traditional women or to give them any responsibility for having chosen their role. To do that would be to blame the victim.

It is all too easy and basically misleading to say that it is woman's *fault* that society is sexist. This is as fallacious as saying that it is the fault of blacks that society is racist, or the fault of the poor that poverty exists. . . . When I write of woman's complicity, I mean a complicity that has in large measure been enforced by conditioning. . . . It is the inherited burden of being condemned to live out the role of 'the Other.' The fault should not be seen as existing primarily in victimized individuals, but rather in demonic power structures which induce individuals to internalize false identities.⁴⁹

In *Beyond God the Father* Daly argues that women once had power in a matriarchy that existed prior to the patriarchy. The matriarchal culture was very different from the patriarchal, "being equalitarian rather than hierarchical and authoritarian."⁵⁰ Daly does not go into detail about how this culture disappeared, but presumably it was overthrown by the organizational skill and power of the patriarchs. When she wrote *Beyond God the Father* Daly did not advocate a revival of the matriarchy, preferring instead an androgynous society. She did not explain why the patriarchal culture was now weak enough for women to take back some of their power.

Five years later, in *Gyn-Ecology*, Daly goes beyond androgyny and

advocates separatism. The conceptualized gap between woman's traditional passivity and her current potential power is even greater than it was in *Beyond God the Father*, and Daly's conception of the extent of patriarchal power has grown. She perceives no real gradations among men: they all benefit from the actions of their most despicable agents. Women all suffer equally, though they are not always aware of this suffering (having been brainwashed by the patriarchs) and though this suffering takes different forms. The goal of the free woman is to become a Spinster: "A woman whose occupation is to spin participates in the whirling movement of creation. She who has chosen her Self, who defines her Self, by choice, neither in relation to children nor to men, who is Self-identified, is a Spinster, a whirling dervish, spinning a new time space."⁵¹

Non-Spinsters believe that "male written texts (biblical, literary, medical, legal, scientific) are 'true.'" They mouth these texts, employ technology for male ends and accept "male fabrications as the true texture of reality." Patriarchy has stolen "woman's cosmos" and has "returned it in the form of *Cosmopolitan* magazine and cosmetics. They have made up our cosmos, our Selves."⁵² In order to do so the patriarchs have stolen the energies and ideas of women.⁵³ But they do not believe women. From the Patty Hearst trial (where Patty was not believed by the jury because she was a woman), to the ignoring of Rachel Carson's warnings on ecology because of her sex, to denying women access to the printed word, women have been ignored by the patriarchy.⁵⁴

The passivity and powerlessness of the traditional woman is underscored in Mary Daly's examination of the Indian Suttee, Chinese foot-binding, African genital mutilation and American Gynecology. She argues that, though all of these institutions were extremely harmful to women, women actively participated in the first three as the agents of men, and enforced the rules. In the case of the gynecologists Daly does not explain why women turned away from midwives to them, but she attempts to demonstrate that the gynecologists are simply agents of male society bent on destroying females.

The Suttee, the custom of Indian wives of deceased husbands throwing themselves on their spouse's funeral pyres, is the first of the anti-female practices discussed. It started out among the higher caste Indian women and gradually spread downward through the society. Daly dismisses the attempt to understand Suttee within the context of Indian society and beliefs as a form of patriarchal scholarship, since she believes that such an understanding hides the oppression of women and tends to shift blame to the victims.⁵⁵ She feels that it is not adequate to argue that the widows had some free choice, or that they committed suicide because they believed in the religion. The custom was enforced by women (the mothers-in-law) but, Daly argues, this fact only hides from view the important question: "Just *who* created and enforced these interpretations which could infect the minds of women who were cast into the role of 'mother-in-law'?"⁵⁶ She compared the women who participated in the Suttee custom with the Jews who went to the concentration camps. Since nobody exonerates the

Germans, Daly argues, why do they whitewash the slaughter of Indian women? Responsibility for the fate of the Indian women lies in “that part of the patriarchy called ‘India,’” and responsibility for the whitewash lies with patriarchal scholarship.

Chinese footbinding is another example of a harsh custom, perpetuated on women by women, for which women bear no responsibility and from which they derived no benefits. According to Daly the women were simply the agents of the patriarchs. Men are treated as a homogeneous group, and those males who spoke out against footbinding are dismissed as an example of male sadism masking itself as compassion.⁵⁸ The feelings of pity that the men experienced are viewed as merely contributing to their sadistic pleasure. It did not occur to the men “that they were the agents behind the mutilation, demanding it and enforcing it, deceptively using their mind-bound women to execute their wishes.” The male’s compassion was thus “pure doublethink” and a “pure abnegation of responsibility” made possible by the fact that it was women who were binding the feet of the girls.⁵⁹ It is evident, argues Daly, that they were forced to do it by the male myth-masters and other dominant males who decided that maimed feet were necessary for male approval and marriageability.⁶⁰ Western male scholars are allied with the Chinese males: their “legitimation of the gynocidal ritual by the Rites of Re-search” followed a “variety of familiar patterns” including “indifference,” “detachment” and the “minimizing of the sadistic nature of Chinese footbinding.” It demonstrates doublethink and “de-tachment” from woman’s oppression, and is “of a piece with that of the Chinese males who were moved to ‘compassion’ at the sight of the tiny feet.”⁶¹

This alliance across time is simply a further demonstration of the fact that “men prefer women to be bent badly ‘out of shape’ on all levels—physical, mental and spiritual.” Women cooperate, but only because they have been “conditioned to believe that this maiming was essential to please the patriarchs.”⁶² Men never act morally, but their needs do change. When a male government ordered that the practice of footbinding be stopped it was simply because they wanted to get women into the work force. The reversal of policy shows that “males were able to change their aesthetic standards for female beauty when their politics required this.”⁶³ Furthermore the new policy was insensitive to the needs of all those women whose feet had previously been bound! Daly’s model precludes the possibility that men can be moral, or that women can be responsible.

The same general treatment is given to African genital mutilation: all responsibility is given to men, and women are seen as their servants. There is no focus on, or there is a dismissal of, ceremonies that cause pain and genital mutilation to men (e.g., male circumcision at puberty) and there is an attack on patriarchal scholarship that tried to understand these customs within a cultural context. Women are seen as neither deriving benefits from the culture nor participating in its creation. Men dominate, and women imbibe their values. The European witchburnings are a further demonstration of this. The massive destruction of women “masked a secret

gynocidal fraternity, whose prime targets were women living outside the control of the patriarchal family, *women who presented an option. . .*”⁶⁴ These women had to be destroyed by the patriarchs and by those women who accepted the values of the patriarchs and acted as their agents.

By arguing that the women were passive agents of the patriarchs, Daly frees them from guilt. But in order to perform this historical exoneration she has to deny that there was a woman’s culture independent of, and at conflict with, male culture. Traditional women are seen as mental and physical slaves. This dis-valuing of traditional women seems—to this author at least—to make inexplicable the growth of the current feminist movement. An implicit analogy to the rise of the Marxian Proletariat does not seem to work. The Proletariat were created in a particular historical epoch, whereas women as an oppressed class live in all historical periods. More important, the Proletariat become active and conscious of themselves because of specific changes in the economic/social structure—changes that create the Proletariat and make it possible for them to organize and thus gain power. No such historical evolution seems to take place in Daly’s theory, and there does not appear to be any explanation for her belief that women can, or will, take back their power.

the theory of the “women’s sphere” feminists: writing to the tune of a different paradigm

The picture of the woman’s world presented by those historians who posit a “Woman’s Sphere” is significantly different from that of the theorists of Patriarchy. One obvious contrast lies in the more careful procedures and the smaller scale generalizations. The woman’s sphere historians look intensely at more limited periods of history than the theorists of Patriarchy,⁶⁵ and clearly place a higher premium upon factual accuracy. They do not argue by analogy, as the advocates of patriarchy are prone to do. Though they do talk of gender related differences, and generally feel that women were placed in an inferior position, there is no concept of an all encompassing conspiratorial patriarchy. Both males and females are viewed as divided into different classes with different interests and varying amounts of power.

The most important difference between the two groups, however, is that the woman’s sphere theorists do not think that traditional woman was psychologically enslaved. They respect her perceptions of her own society, and therefore they make extensive use of diaries and woman’s literature. They take seriously the viewpoints expressed in these documents and, as Nancy Cott notes, the more historians have relied on the personal writings of women, and the more they have moved away from didactic literature on woman’s place, the more positively they have evaluated the woman’s sphere.⁶⁶

Those who focus on the woman’s sphere do not concentrate on the arenas in which women had no power; rather they study those in which women were powerful. Thus there is little focus on the institutional/

political sphere, since women were usually excluded from, and powerless within, this arena. Ann Douglas notes that a history of events, especially in America, leaves women out:

Women had had less than their share . . . in the elitist business of law making and constitution composing. Feminine work had always been ahistorical by the definition of male historians: raising children and keeping house have customarily been viewed as timeless routines capable of only minor variations. In a country like America whose historical identity rests on a short series of self-conscious crises, the exclusion of women from the historical life of the culture is particularly acute. . . . Men keep public records; women seldom figure in them, much less keep them. American history by any comparative basis afforded in the western world is an extraordinarily recorded affair and hence an extraordinarily masculine affair.⁶⁷

Douglas concentrates instead on social and cultural history, and argues that women came to dominate both the church and the culture as they joined the newly weakened male ministers in attempting to influence the direction of a country that they had no direct part in ruling. They eventually assume a “dictatorial” rule over the culture and come to dominate both the church and the printed media.⁶⁸ Women’s culture, though, had to interact with the men’s. The limitations placed on the woman’s culture perverted the result, as the push towards a culture of feelings in an increasingly competitive, aggrandizing society ended in a cult of sentimentalism and mass culture.

Ann Douglas argues that it was not only that women were barred from politics—they were disaffected by it. Politics was not *her* politics and sentimentalism had served her needs better.⁶⁹ Sheila Rothman contends that women tended to stay out of the political arena because they had been badly burned when they had tried to enter it. Laws designed by women to protect women had injured some (by making it hard for women to compete in the market place) and had exacerbated the class battle among women.⁷⁰ After that women wanted to change the society in the direction of “virtue,” rather than participate in the governing of the society.⁷¹ Women finally re-entered the political arena, but not because they wanted to be a part of male culture. They viewed themselves as different, and they “fought for the suffrage in order to bring their special qualities to the ballot box.”⁷²

Like Douglas and Rothman, Nancy Cott concentrates on the arena within which women were powerful. It was because the woman’s sphere eluded the cash nexus that it was separate. The home was both a symbol and a remnant of pre-industrial work in the newly emerging industrial society; its fate was to be both the object of yearning and scorn. Woman’s work, so closely connected to the home, was to share in this glorification and devaluation.⁷³ Women themselves viewed their work as more valuable and more Christian than men’s work.⁷⁴ Women never challenged the organizational society, but rather accommodated themselves to it. Their

role, as they saw it, was to stabilize society by generating and regenerating moral character. Since the male world lacked the institutions to effect moral restraint, the home became the redemptive counterpart to that world, and was supposed to fit men to pursue their worldly aims in a regulated way.⁷⁵

It is clear that the different methodologies used by the theorists of patriarchy and the historians of the woman's sphere, and the varying areas focused upon, give rise to divergent conclusions. If the defenders of the concept of patriarchy see the woman's position as totally subordinate, the historians of the woman's sphere see her role as ambivalent. Nancy Cott argues that the doctrine of a woman's sphere gave women a key to power and, since a separate sphere was assigned to women, it helped to organize and create feminism. At the same time the restricted nature of this sphere limited women's power.⁷⁶ Sheila Rothman argues in much the same way. Women had the job of civilizing men—to marry was to capture a wild animal⁷⁷—and to tame society and transform the culture. But if women were stronger than men they were also weaker. They were the more civilized, the more moral, the more virtuous of the two sexes, but they were also the more sickly and more susceptible to insanity.⁷⁸ Rothman introduces a new element in that she sees women as not only fighting against men—not to compete with them, of course, but to reform them—but as fighting against women. Upper-class women tried to change the new immigrants in order to make them into competent mothers and to raise their moral standards. The new model of the woman, one that emphasizes gender similarities rather than differences, is seen as growing out of the old role of the educated mother who improved society by correctly bringing up her own children.⁷⁹

The Feminization of American Culture also emphasizes the ambiguity of the woman's role. Douglas argues that neither sex had absolute power. Women were the keepers of the culture, but what they stood for was trivialized by their position. They were in a fixed fight, and they were bound to lose since they lacked power of any tangible kind.⁸⁰ The woman was to be a consumer and was "to preserve both the values and the commodities which her competitive husband, father and son had little time to honor or enjoy: she was to provide an antidote and purpose of their labor."⁸¹ On the other hand, women had a major effect on the direction of American society. They had the power to defeat the ministers, and "feminized" American culture. Douglas does not think that the woman's contribution was entirely beneficial. She does feel, however, that modern America cannot be comprehended without understanding the dynamic relationship between male and female cultures.

conclusion: the vision of the passive female

Three major differences emerge when the woman's sphere historians are contrasted with the theorists of patriarchy. The first difference has been emphasized throughout this article. The woman's sphere historians view

traditional woman as having had some power and will of her own. She might have been institutionally and economically dominated by males, but she did not act as a male agent, and she retained a perspective and power base of her own. Traditional woman's perception of events can therefore be trusted, and diaries and letters are treated as though they contain valid perceptions of the world and woman's place within it.

In contrast, the theorists of patriarchy view the traditional woman as a mental slave. For the most part she had adopted the perspective of her male rulers—a version of “false consciousness.” Because of this the perceptions of traditional women are not to be trusted. Women were victims, but they did not know it. Strong women merely acted as the agents of the male rulers—they had no ideas or power of their own. Characteristically, if women appear to be dominant, or to have an important social role, their behavior is carefully analyzed to prove that the appearance is misleading. If men appear to be in control, on the other hand, it is assumed that they are. Laws that seem to favor or protect women are dismissed as being of benefit only to the patriarchs.⁸² Laws that favor males are never analyzed in this way.

Closely related to the different evaluation of historical woman is a second characteristic of the theorists of patriarchy. They are arrogant writers, in the sense that they claim that an author knows better what people feel—what they really feel—than the people s/he is writing about. The opposite approach (used by the historians of the woman's sphere) is to assume that the people themselves know best how they feel. Just because I think that you are angry or should be angry, does not mean that you either are angry or should be angry. The fact that I think you are exploited does not mean that you are exploited or should feel exploited. I might be able to convince you that you should feel exploited—in which case you do feel exploited—or I might not. In the latter case I might argue that you are dumb, or passive, or don't know what you really feel. Or I might say that I would feel exploited if I were in your shoes, but that is my projection, not your feeling. Yet, the theorists of patriarchy, angry at what they see as the exploitation of the female, have projected this feeling back upon historical woman, and have argued that she should have felt exploited and angry. And, if she did not feel this way, the only explanation they can come up with is that she was psychologically conditioned. At one point—with a group of mostly older women in a Synagogue—I presented the Patriarchal thesis. At the time, with some reservations, I believed it. The Synagogue women didn't. They felt that they were the ones who had done the really valuable and important work. Departing from the role of benevolently arrogant professor, I finally heard them. To assert that I knew more about their feelings, about the value and richness of their lives, than they themselves did would have been an ultimate “chutzpah.” It is this very denial of the validity of historical woman's perceptions and feelings that is central to the patriarchal argument. The approach robs historical women of their dignity. It lacks respect.

The discussion with the Synagogue women raises a third difference

between the two perspectives—one which is subtle, but interesting and important. The theorists of patriarchy adopt male standards in evaluating the role of traditional women, while the historians of the woman's sphere reject these standards. The woman's sphere historians feel that "woman's work" was important, and argue that this work has been ignored and devalued by male historians who have concentrated largely upon the political/economic sphere. The theorists of patriarchy, on the other hand, are primarily institutionalists and legalists. The important sphere is considered to be the male political/economic realm, and the woman's traditional role is viewed as less than fully human.⁸³ Thus, though male institutions and values are rejected, traditional women are judged to be passive and weak from the perspective of these institutions and values.

The theorists of patriarchy also adhere to the patriarchal vision when they view traditional women as passive and weak. This, according to the theorists of patriarchy themselves, is the way in which men saw—and see—women. The only difference is that men have believed women were passive by nature, and the current theorists think that she was psychologically and institutionally enslaved by the dominant males. In other words, women are perceived as even weaker than the patriarchs saw them, because they are viewed as enslaved not by God, or nature, but by men.

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notes

1. Kathleen Finegan, "The Portrayal of Men in the Fiction of the *Ladies Home Journal*: 1910-1960," unpublished American Studies seminar paper.

2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, 1952).

3. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York, 1969). Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York, 1976). Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York, 1975). Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, 1973). Mary Daly, *Gyn-Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston, 1978).

The choice of books used in this paper is obviously somewhat arbitrary. I tried to use a representative sample of influential books and, at the same time, to use few enough books to keep the article manageable. Simone de Beauvoir's classic was too complex to be analyzed in conjunction with the other books, and would have to be written about separately. The two books by Mary Daly are very different from each other, and have both been extremely influential. I had reservations about using two books by the same author, but finally decided that there were no equivalents.

4. Books that analyze the women's sphere, and women's consciousness, are often assigned in college and university classes. Important books have been written in psychology, anthropology, linguistics, literary criticism, etc.

5. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977). Sheila M. Rothman, *Woman's Proper Place: A History of Changing Ideals and Practices, 1970 to the Present* (New York, 1978). Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977).

The selection of the books here is even more arbitrary than those listed in footnote 3. The paper does not focus on these books, and I tried to choose a few outstanding books that illustrated the approach. Since the theorists of patriarchy I am using utilize a historical approach, I have used books that focus on history in examining the woman's sphere argument. Many other books could have been used.

6. Millett, 25.

7. Rich, 41.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, xviii.

10. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 9.

11. Daly, *Gyn-Ecology*, 69-70.

12. Millett, 45; my emphasis.

13. Brownmiller, 45; Brownmiller's emphasis.

14. *Ibid.*, 228-229.

15. *Ibid.*, 450.
16. *Ibid.*, 25; my emphasis.
17. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 122. See also 116, 118.
18. Millett, 159.
19. *Ibid.*, 26.
20. *Ibid.*, 33, 35, 67.
21. *Ibid.*, 62, 159.
22. See, for example, Brownmiller, 425.
23. *Ibid.*, 241.
24. Rich, 22.
25. *Ibid.*, 15.
26. *Ibid.*, 24.
27. *Ibid.*, 35.
28. *Ibid.*, 209.
29. *Ibid.*, 211, 213.
30. *Ibid.*, 246.
31. *Ibid.*, 247.
32. *Ibid.*, 247, 250.
33. *Ibid.*, 249.
34. *Ibid.*, 116.
35. *Ibid.*, 52.
36. *Ibid.*, 116.
37. *Ibid.*, 253.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, 116, 172.
40. *Ibid.*, 179.
41. *Ibid.*, 53. There is a line of academic argument that examines the reasons why women changed from midwives to gynecologists and suggests they did so because gynecologists, though not safe, were safer than midwives. There is little definite information in this area, and motivations are usually ascribed to women on the basis of a statistical analysis of the classes of women who shifted to gynecologists, combined with an analysis of infant and maternal mortality rates. It is easy to make ideological generalizations, but these generalizations have been difficult to prove.
42. *Ibid.*, 53.
43. *Ibid.*, 259.
44. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 173.
45. *Ibid.*, 105.
46. *Ibid.*, 177.
47. *Ibid.*, 15.
48. *Ibid.*, 27.
49. *Ibid.*, 49.
50. *Ibid.*, 93-94.
51. Daly, *Gyn-Ecology*, 3-4.
52. *Ibid.*, 5-6.
53. *Ibid.*, 27.
54. *Ibid.*, 21, 92-93; *Beyond God the Father*, xi.
55. *Gyn-Ecology*, 125.
56. *Ibid.*, 123, 126.
57. *Ibid.*, 129.
58. *Ibid.*, 137.
59. *Ibid.*, 138.
60. *Ibid.*, 140.
61. *Ibid.*, 143-144.
62. *Ibid.*, 145.
63. *Ibid.*, 186.
64. *Ibid.*, 186; Daly's emphasis.
65. The usual period seems to be around 50 years. Places are also specific. Subtitles often indicate the period to be covered. For example, Rothman's subtitle is "A History of Changing Ideas and Practices 1870 to the Present" and Cott's is "Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835." Douglas deals with America from 1820-1875. The theorists of Patriarchy on the other hand, usually study at least several centuries and more than one culture. These differences indicate a disagreement as to whether a broad historical perspective or attention to detail is more important for arriving at the "truth."
66. Cott, 197. Cott argues that there have been three successive interpretations of women's sphere. The first tended to see women as victims "of an ideology of domesticity that was imposed on them between 1820 and 1850 in order to serve men's view of social utility and order." The second interpretation observed that women made use of the ideology of domesticity in order to gain influence and satisfaction and "even to express hostility to men." The third revision viewed women's sphere as a basis for a subculture among women that was a source of strength and identity and implied that "the ideology's tenacity owed as much to women's motives as to the imposition of men's or 'society's' wishes" (Cott, p. 197).

67. Douglas, 220. See also 182-188.

68. *Ibid.*, 69, 275. The general argument is made throughout the book.

69. *Ibid.*, 307.

70. Rothman, 161-174.

71. *Ibid.*, 109 and generally in Chapter Three.

72. *Ibid.*, 127. Compare with Douglas, 307.

73. Cott, 62.

74. *Ibid.*, 67-69.

75. *Ibid.*, 67-69, 97-98.

76. *Ibid.*, 201-205.

77. Rothman, 22.

78. *Ibid.*, 23, 26.

79. *Ibid.*, Chapter Three.

80. Douglas, 8, 12.

81. *Ibid.*, 70.

82. See, for example, Adrienne Rich's discussion of the various labor laws and court decisions designed to protect female workers. Rich argues that they were passed only to protect the patriarchal family and the role of the man as breadwinner. (Rich, 31-35). Contrast this treatment of these laws with Sheila Rothman's (157-75). Rothman views them as having been supported by, and aiding, upper class women. They had, she argues, the unintended effect of hurting lower class women and they divided the early women's movement against itself.

83. See, especially, 8 above.